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**Anticipating the New Woman figure through subversions of feminine identity: Rhoda**

**Broughton, Ouida, and female sexuality**

by

**Caroline E. Martin**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:

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Ames, Iowa

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## ABSTRACT

Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* and Ouida's (Marie Louise Ramè) *Moths* were highly popular in the Victorian period, but have fallen from the favor of readers and critics over the course of the twentieth century. Of note is each author's overt discussion of the topic of female sexuality, the very treatment of which challenges traditional Victorian standards of morality. In looking at these books, I assess their representations of the ways in which Victorian societal strictures—particularly in categorizing and objectifying women—interfered with the formation of female sexuality and female identity.

While Broughton and Ouida do not discuss female identity in quite the same manner, they both address concerns about the commodification of the female body, especially as this occurs within the marriage market. In turn, while these authors would not necessarily have considered themselves feminists, their books discuss questions of primary interest to New Woman feminist advocates at the *fin-de-siècle*. Issues surrounding female subjection are at the core of New Woman advocacy, and for this reason I see *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Moths* as precursors to the New Woman novel that emerged near the end of the Victorian period. Ultimately, I view these works by Broughton and Ouida as bridging the gap from mid-century Victorian women's literature to the literature of the *fin-de-siècle*, thus making it possible for New Woman fiction to evolve.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Rhoda Broughton and Ouida (Marie Louise Ramè) were popular late-Victorian woman novelists who began writing in the sensational 1860s but fell out of favor over the course of the twentieth century. Each broached the topic of female sexuality in an overt way that was typically frowned upon by staid, middle-class Victorian society. Broughton in *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) uses language steeped in sensuality to draw attention to the Victorian concern that a woman might acknowledge—or even embrace—her sexuality. Ouida's *Moths* (1880) in many ways continues the conversation of female sexuality that Broughton started. Where Broughton's novel deals with awakening female sexuality, Ouida's text explores how the manipulation and exploitation of a woman's sexuality necessarily stymie it.

This thesis addresses *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Moths* in order to assess the ways that Victorian societal strictures—particularly in categorizing and objectifying women—interfered with the formation of female sexuality and female identity. Broughton and Ouida both juxtapose nature and society to highlight their conversations about female sexuality, suggesting natural environments allow for a normal female sexual evolution, whereas artificial environments pervert female sexuality. While scholarship on Broughton and Ouida has increased in the last decade, no scholar has yet paired *Cometh Up* and *Moths*. Such a pairing, though, highlights just how prevalent a concern with the manipulation of female sexuality actually was at the time Broughton and Ouida were writing. More so, attention needs to be given to these novels for the fact that each text, though discretely, played a role in the formation of progressive women's literature in the late-Victorian period, a detail that scholars have frequently neglected to address.

Broughton and Ouida did not know each other, nor did they envision themselves as working with the same literary or political purpose in mind. However, their novels share an interest in critiquing social stances on women's sexuality and the marriage market. Both authors are equally scathing in their evaluations of the Victorian marriage market, depicting the young women forced to take part in it as actual goods for sale. On the other hand, each novelist's portrayal of femininity differs greatly from the other's, as Ouida's heroine adheres to a strict—even old-fashioned—conventionality, and Broughton's heroine resists this at nearly every turn. Still, and in spite of these differences, I see the connection between Broughton and Ouida's texts as having formed naturally, particularly considering that many of the social issues addressed by the two authors were ones of primary concern at the time of each novel's publication. Moreover, the fashion in which Broughton and Ouida discuss female sexuality sheds light on evolving feminist concerns in the mid-to-late Victorian period. While Broughton and Ouida would not necessarily have aligned themselves with the most progressive early feminists, their novels certainly touch on the very issues brought up by such figures, which in itself suggests Broughton and Ouida used their fiction as a means to push circuitously for advocacy.

In some senses, both authors worked within the literary and cultural context reflected by Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62). Within the poem Patmore extols the virtues of a character meant more or less to stand for the perfect Victorian woman. Patmore's "angel in the house" figure has frequently been used as a means for comparison between the conventional and unconventional Victorian woman. In a recent article on *The Angel*, Natasha Moore notes of Patmore, "He wrote plainly and repeatedly, in prose as well as verse, in support of some of his age's most conservative notions of womanhood and of relations between the sexes, and from this perspective the poem's conversion into a rallying point for anti-

feminist positions in the final decades of the nineteenth century is a logical development” (42). Moore goes on to propose that Patmore does not necessarily attempt to perpetuate the stereotypical ideal of the Victorian woman as conventionally angelic, but she instead suggests Patmore’s purpose was “to controvert the view that modern life is ‘unpoetical” (56). Whatever Patmore’s poetic intent, his poem certainly upholds the conventional model of Victorian womanhood, and he helped to popularize—even mythicize—this figure with the poem’s publication. I am in no way concerned with exploring whether or not Patmore’s text constitutes an “anti-feminist” one, but I use the “angel in the house” figure to underline just how unconventional a character Broughton’s Nell is. Broughton’s heroine especially refuses to adhere to the conventional feminine ideal of the Victorian “angel in the house,” where Ouida’s heroine Vere in *Moths* to a point appears to be a fitting representation of this figure.

Nell’s use of sensual language not only places her outside the category of “the angel” but also allowed Victorian reviewers to characterize Broughton’s novel as sensational. The sensation novel emerged in the early 1860s and, as Patrick Brantlinger points out, the reason such texts were typified as sensational stems from their subject matter: “[The sensation novel] deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings” (1). *Cometh Up* follows none of these dramatic plots, but its overt discussion of female sexuality has allowed it to be placed by Victorian reviewers within the sensational category. What is more, the very act of classifying Broughton’s novel as sensational acted as a way to devalue its literary merit, pigeonholing it as a lesser form of fiction. As Lyn Pykett explains, sensation fiction by female authors was viewed as potentially more transgressive than sensation fiction written by men:



Sensation fiction was...both *dismissed* as *merely* a feminine form and also feared and censured as a non—or even anti-feminine form—a form which was not only deviant, but also threatening and dangerous. Both the subject-matter of sensation fiction, and its dominant modes of representation, transgressed socially acceptable norms of the proper feminine. (34)

Nell never commits adultery in the text, but she certainly wants to, and she is not afraid to say it. Broughton's openness about Nell's thoughts in this regard shocked contemporary reviewers, who deemed the novel sensational and immoral. Recent scholars of Broughton's work have often gotten caught up in this old debate, with the unfortunate result that they have focused mainly on *Cometh Up*'s "sensational" aspects instead of studying closely Broughton's complex and unconventional depictions of Victorian femininity.

Ouida's *Moths* cannot be labeled as a sensation novel, partly because it was published long after the sensational 1860s. But the more significant issue with Ouida's novel, as with Broughton's, is that it cannot really be adequately categorized. Broughton and Ouida do not go against the grain merely by portraying femininity in untraditional ways; rather, they stand out mainly because their novels cannot be relegated easily to one particular genre. It seems this resistance to classification may have troubled Victorian readers, who could not decide quite what to make of either writer. Monica Fryckstedt, in discussing Victorian critic Geraldine Jewsbury's wavering reviews of Ouida's fiction, suggests, "Perhaps Miss Jewsbury's ambivalent attitude to Ouida reflects her inability to fit this eccentric writer into any of the existing standard compartments of romance, sensationalism and domestic realism" (22). Compartmentalizing an author's text makes it easier for critics to attempt to write off that text as an entertaining romance or sensation novel. It is possible that neither Broughton nor Ouida intended to create works that

bridged genres in this way, but the fact that they do so further highlights each author's treatment of Victorian femininity, emphasizing that female identity is in turn multilayered and not able to be written off into so simple a category as "angel in the house."

If these texts are to be categorized at all, perhaps the most likely way to view them is as precursors to the New Woman novel of the *fin-de-siècle*. The New Woman figure is an incredibly convoluted one, but she has typically been viewed as a sort of Victorian feminist, an advocate for women's rights with regard to marriage, education, and even rational dress. Talia Schaffer points out that our current understanding of the New Woman is one that scholars have created recently; the New Woman as Victorians portrayed her was often a caricature of progressive Victorian womanhood and a fabrication of the Victorian media ("Nothing But Foolscap" 39). As she puts it, "when people wrote and spoke about the 'New Woman' in the 1890s, they were usually referring to a very different figure: the unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon ready to overturn the world" (39). As Schaffer acknowledges, such a demonization of the New Woman worked as a scare-tactic utilized by those fearful of the progression of women's rights. Ouida notably wrote against the New Woman figure, responding to Sarah Grand's seminal "New Aspect of the Woman Question" (1894). Much of Ouida's contention is that she views New Women, in pushing for equality with men, as actually wanting to become masculine without giving up "special treatment" for being female. Ouida writes, "The 'Scum-Woman' and the 'Cow-Woman,' to quote the elegant phraseology of the defenders of their sex, are both of them less of a menace to humankind than the New Woman with her fierce vanity, her undigested knowledge, her overweening estimate of her own value, and her fatal want of all sense of the ridiculous" (*Views and Opinions* 215). Scholars today often view this exchange between Grand and Ouida as being responsible for coining the phrase "New Woman."

Broughton and Ouida are not New Women authors, yet *Cometh Up* and *Moths* draw attention to social issues of key concern to New Women writers and audiences alike. What is more, Broughton and Ouida were discussing issues surrounding female identity even before many New Women authors were broaching them. Throughout this thesis, then, I intend to use the term “New Woman” fairly loosely with regard to Broughton’s and Ouida’s works, if only to indicate that their works show Victorian women striving to reach beyond the traditional figure of Patmore’s “angel in the house.”

The two chapters that follow address *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Moths* in detail, as I articulate the ways in which these two novels serve as crucial precursors to the more familiar New Woman novels that began to appear much nearer to the end of the century. In Chapter 2, I argue that Broughton’s *Cometh Up* comprises an unconventional look at female sexuality, made even more controversial by the fact that Broughton’s protagonist desires a man not her husband and makes no effort to hide this. Broughton uses highly sensual language to underline Nell’s awakening feelings of sexual longing. Such language certainly garnered censure from Victorian reviewers of the novel, but I argue that Broughton uses a language of sensuality in an effort to normalize the existence of female sexuality. The comparatively open way in which Broughton discusses female sexuality allowed Victorian critics to term *Cometh Up* as sensational. Pykett notes that “sensationalizing” a text as Broughton does could essentially act as an authorial tactic to draw attention:

The sensation novelists and New Woman writers not only caused a sensation by generating critical controversy, they also generated controversy by being sensational. Reviewers of both groups...were dismayed by their tendency to

dwell on physical sensation, particularly in their representations of women and women's sexual feelings. (7-8)

Whether the attention Broughton garnered from Victorian reviewers of *Cometh Up* was good or bad, she makes effective use of sensationalism to draw reader attention to the overall topic of female sexuality.

Ouida's *Moths* extends this discussion of female sexuality, albeit bleakly, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Where Broughton's story in many ways seems to embrace female sexuality, Ouida examines the effects that exploitation of the female body may have on a woman's sexuality. Like Broughton, Ouida additionally uses shock value when she emphasizes boldly that wives and prostitutes are regularly conflated in Victorian society, further emphasizing her point that female sexuality is constantly being exploited, and by men and women alike. My assertion in this chapter is that Ouida's heroine, Vere, is at no point allowed control over her own sexual being, and that this fact is Ouida's primary contention throughout the text. As her mother, husband, and love interest manipulate Vere throughout the novel, she is denied the sort of natural sexual exploration allowed to Nell in *Cometh Up*. Although *Moths* ends with Vere's divorce from a cruel husband, she quickly remarries, this time, a man who has spent the bulk of the text concerned with how "unspotted" Vere is or is not. Ultimately, I read *Moths* as a tragedy that chronicles Vere's slow mental and physical decline once she has entered into the marriage market, her literal body and sexuality more or less sold off to the highest bidder. In the end, Vere escapes her first husband only to marry a second who will similarly continue to manipulate her sexual being, even if it is in a more innocuous fashion.

## CHAPTER 2

CHALLENGING THE “ANGEL IN THE HOUSE:” THE IMMORALITY OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN RHODA BROUGHTON’S *COMETH UP AS A FLOWER*

Rhoda Broughton’s sensational *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) boldly challenges traditional concepts of female vice and female sexuality in mid-Victorian England. Broughton layers the topic of female corruption with overarching discussions of marriage and romance in order to create a kind of anti-heroine who pushes against the ideal of the Victorian “angel in the house.” While Broughton’s novel is still unfamiliar to many, Pamela Gilbert points out that the body of Broughton’s work is undergoing a rediscovery among current scholars (12). Only a handful of contemporary scholars have written critically on the novel, many of them focusing on the question of which genre the novel inhabits: sensation, romance, autobiography, or confession. In many ways *Cometh Up as a Flower* is all of these. But amid this broad discussion of generic classification and conventions, scholars have lost sight of the unusual power of Broughton’s unconventional portrayals of femininity, even though these portrayals were central to not only her fiction but also the contemporary critical responses to her work. Recent essays by Lindsey Faber and Marysa Demoor have begun to break this ground by exploring the novel’s themes of sibling relationships and depictions of the self. This movement toward portrayals of female identity is what I would like to explore in *Cometh Up*, especially as Broughton uses sexualized language so persistently in the novel.

Because Broughton’s representations of the female experience diverge markedly from the traditional models of Victorian womanhood so prevalent in literature of the period (which in itself accounts for much of the reason Victorian reviewers of the novel labeled it “sensational”), these representations deserve to be the objects of particular attention. Middle-class Victorian

female experience truly stands at the crux of *Cometh Up*. Broughton very specifically focuses on a young woman from a once wealthy, now destitute, family, who feels compelled to marry money to save her family from ruin. Broughton's primary source for unease throughout the novel lies in the ways that judgments regarding female morality can be used to label and classify women, a problem that has its corollary in the way that Broughton's work was treated by contemporaries who labeled her novel as "sensational" largely to downgrade its literary merit. The mix of genres in Broughton's novel also reinforces the fact that, like a woman, a text can represent multiple characteristics all at once. Broughton underlines that women cannot be typified as only "good" or "bad," especially for so innocuous an action as having sexual inclinations that are never realized. In short, Broughton recognizes—and *Cometh Up as a Flower* offers as a crucial message—that expecting Victorian women to measure up to the standard of the conventionally idealized "angel in the house" is in no way realistic but robs women of a crucial part of their identities.

## I

In *Cometh Up*, Broughton presents readers with Nell, a heroine markedly different from the conventional milk-and-water Victorian miss. Nell loves the penniless soldier Dick, but her father and sister pressure her to marry the wealthy Sir Hugh in order to save the family from penury. As Sir Hugh courts her, Nell maintains a side romance with Dick. Nell continually punctuates her story with racy language of sexual longing and desire, feelings she has for a man who is not—and never will be—her husband. A series of misunderstandings perpetrated by

Nell's sister, Dolly, leads Nell to practically "sell" herself in an unhappy marriage with Sir Hugh, the novel culminating in Nell's death from consumptive despair.

Unlike other sensation novels in the Victorian period—works with plotlines steeped in murder, bigamy, and adultery—the sensationalism that contemporary readers found in *Cometh Up* inheres largely in the sensual language of Broughton's text. Broughton makes use of these sensational aspects in her novel to draw attention to the fact that her heroine does not align with conventional standards of Victorian femininity. Sensual language typically appears in moments where Nell contemplates her burgeoning sexuality, and most especially as she muses on her attraction to Dick. Nell's longing is drawn to the forefront of her narrative when she discusses these amorous feelings she has for Dick in candid and unapologetic terms. It should be remembered that, not only is Nell incredibly brash for discussing her sexual feelings in the first place, but Broughton, as a female author, pushes the boundaries of Victorian propriety for even writing about them. As Nell recalls feelings of her own awakening sensuality, she is the wife of Sir Hugh, looking back on her thwarted romance with Dick:

I look back on that May morning, and on myself at my pretty play-work, as Eve must have looked back upon the pastimes of Paradise. I am not separated from that time by any great crime...but I think the yearning regret that filled the universal mother's bosom...was akin to the eager longing (never to be gratified now) with which I inhale in fancy the rough western breezes blowing round old Lestrangle. (97)

Even as a married woman, Nell acknowledges the longing she felt—and still feels—for Dick, a longing that is "never to be gratified." Part of what makes Nell's narrative so suggestive is that this romantic longing insinuates itself as sexual longing. Nell frankly yearns for her emotional

bond with Dick to become a physical one; she even suggests that this yearning may be contagious, imbibed through the “rough western breezes.” Additionally, any sexual relationship Nell and Dick could have had becomes less likely, and even more potentially transgressive, with her marriage to Sir Hugh. Nell positions her desire, like Eve’s yearning, in a strongly self-censuring light. Yet again, Nell attempts to soften her discussion of female sexuality by acknowledging Eve’s sin, then taking a step back and identifying Eve as the “universal mother,” such domestic references aligning themselves with the “angel in the house.” On the other hand, Broughton paints Nell as highly unconventional both in these descriptions of longing and through Nell’s acknowledgment that, as a married woman, she sexually desires a man who is not her husband.

Nell’s sensual proclivities are never made explicit, but are continually being tempered by Nell herself as she wavers between her sexual feelings and societal expectations. In an attempt to downplay her sensuality, Nell at times inserts tongue-in-cheek moments to poke fun at her problematic feelings of sexual longing. While Nell intends these instances to moderate her desire in the eyes of the reader, such moments in actuality only highlight the sensual tone of the novel. During one particular scene, at harvest-time, Nell contemplates how she longs to play in the newly-cut hay as she did when a child, that “even now, though I have been to a dinner party, and set up a lover, my soul hankers after the forbidden fruit” (134). The “forbidden fruit” here (again suggestive of Eve) actually refers to Nell’s childlike desire to play in the hay, though this reference in itself—summoning the phrase to “roll in the hay”—has sexual undertones. Further, though Nell’s mention of “forbidden fruit” is seemingly innocent, when this is placed next to the mention of Nell’s “lover” Dick, the reader naturally marries the two, ultimately reminding the reader of Nell’s desire to become Dick’s lover in fact.



Broughton continually evokes this sensual language in the text by way of Nell's own depictions of longing, as well as through such seemingly innocuous methods as describing the scenery around Nell. As represented in the passages above, Nell's musings on her sexuality are frequently tied to, and even mimicked by, scenes in nature and in the environment she inhabits; therefore, Broughton permeates her novel with both overt and covert imagery that is evocative of female sexuality. More to the point, Broughton's use of nature imagery throughout *Cometh Up* works to highlight not only Nell's inherent sensuality but also Broughton's underlying assertion that female sexuality is natural. In the passage above, although Nell quells her urge to play in the hay, she does lay down in the nearby grass to take in the scenery. Broughton, through Nell's eyes, describes this scene in a way that imitates Nell's awakening sexuality, even allowing for an interaction between nature and the sensuality Nell feels:

I clasp my hands at the back of my head and lie very still, so still that a little blue butterfly settles on my breast, and opens and closes its white-lined wings slowly in the sun...From my low bed I look straight into the sycamore; I see the coy little shadows playing hide and seek; see wonderful quivering lights; see the leaves in all the bravery of their new attire. (134)

Yet again, Nell attempts to soften her sensual feelings, juxtaposing this with depictions of the innocence of nature. On the other hand, the nature imagery mimics Nell's newly-discovered sexuality, the "coy" shadows imitating Nell's flirtation with Dick, while the "quivering lights" recall her constant longing. Such a scene highlights what is so *sensational* about the text: the fact that an unmarried woman can have sexual feelings to begin with, and that Broughton dares to write them into her novel. Moments where Nell addresses her sexual longing are problematic

for readers because, instead of provoking feelings that typify the sensation genre, like shock or suspense, Broughton's descriptions evoke responses of a sexualized nature.

Victorian reviewers' censure of *Cometh Up* stemmed mostly from the fact that not only might the novel indoctrinate female readers in the topic of female sexuality, but it could potentially create a physical response in readers. Kate Flint asserts that portrayals of female sexuality are exactly what Victorian critics of the sensational feared most: "The presence of sexual desire and sexual energy within the fictions was singled out...the heroines...challenge the ideological premiss [sic] that the middle-class woman should be pure, innocent, and relatively passive" (274-75). Nell provides a prime example of the sort of anti-heroine Flint describes because she boldly addresses sensations of longing and desire, and even considers acting on them with someone other than her husband. Despite Flint's declaration that a heroine need not be "pure, innocent, and relatively passive," Nell fits none of these descriptors. Broughton, though, does not to push her heroine too far beyond the bounds of propriety: she never truly allows Nell to conduct an extramarital affair. She only lets her think about it.

## II

Many Victorian reviewers—the most critical of them being women—found Broughton's use of sensual imagery morally reprehensible. *Cometh Up*'s suggestive intimations of female sexuality essentially allow the text to be placed in the category of sensation fiction. For Victorian critics, thinking was apparently akin to doing, so that Nell's resistance to her adulterous impulses made her nevertheless a villainess worthy of a sensation novel. This sort of transgressive female character brings with her the danger of imparting less-than-desirable values

to the minds of an impressionable female readership, which led some to condemn Broughton's texts altogether. E. F. Benson, in *As We Were* (1930), recalled decades later the contemporary public censure of Broughton's work: "When [Broughton] began writing, her books were deemed to be very risky, she was thought to be of the breed of Zola, and no well-brought-up girl was allowed to read them. But now...she was considered of the breed of Miss Yonge, and well brought-up girls were strongly urged to read them by their mammas" (269). Zola, who boldly discussed sex (especially extramarital sex) and made "loose" women his heroines, seems a far cry from Broughton; however, the two authors deal with overlapping themes of female identity and sexuality, albeit in different degrees of explicitness. Yonge, on the other hand, wrote to educate young women morally, situating her texts within the language of religion. Broughton may be said to fall somewhere between the brashness of Zola and the conservatism of Yonge. More to the point, Benson's sense of the way that Broughton's reputation changed indicates more about how depictions of female sexuality in literature became more frequent over time than any tendency in Broughton to become a less subversive writer.

Geraldine Jewsbury, a reader for the publisher Bentley and Son and reviewer for the literary magazine the *Athenaeum*, was one of Broughton's harshest female critics. When Richard Bentley accepted *Cometh Up* for publication, he did so without receiving the usual reader report from Jewsbury, who most certainly would have protested. Jeanne Fahnestock suggests Bentley was acting in good faith based on his prior dealings with Broughton's uncle, author Sheridan le Fanu (261). In any case, Jewsbury chastised Bentley privately, writing to him, "What evil angel persuaded you to accept that coarse vulgar & *very* objectionable novel...I felt *ashamed* as I read it" (qtd. in Fahnestock 261). A female reader addressing a female author, Jewsbury's critique of *Cometh Up* reveals how harshly some women judged others based upon

morality. Most interesting, though, Jewsbury does not appear to have realized, since Broughton's early novels were published anonymously, that Broughton was a female author. Exactly a month after Jewsbury's comment to Bentley, she published a review on *Cometh Up* in *The Athenaeum*, where she wrote, "That the author is not a young woman, but a man, who, in the present story, shows himself destitute of refinement of thought or feeling, and ignorant of all that women either are or ought to be, is evident on every page" (514). In Jewsbury's eyes, it was shocking that a man would write a novel as steeped in sensual language as *Cometh Up*; furthermore, familiarity with such topics connotes for Jewsbury that this author must be male, not female. One can only imagine how alarmed Jewsbury must have been to discover that *Cometh Up* was written by the very sort of young woman Jewsbury insisted would never bring up such topics in print, nor probably even know about them. Jewsbury could not know whether Broughton was "immoral," yet she willingly used Broughton's *knowledge* of immorality to condemn both her and her novel.

In his *Autobiography* (1883), Anthony Trollope extended the implications of this sort of criticism by expressing his doubt about the veracity of Broughton's female characters, who could not be realistic if they were so immoral. Trollope mixes admiration for Broughton with censure, because "In Miss Broughton's determination not to be mawkish and missish, she has made her ladies do and say things which ladies would not do and say" (224). Jewsbury and Trollope are ultimately troubled that Broughton's female characters are acting in ways that are *unfeminine*, at least in the Patmore sense. Furthermore, women are expected not to "do and say" certain things; to depict a female character pushing against the feminine norm proves much too unsettling for such critics. This notion feeds into Broughton's overarching point that women, like men, have sensual and sexual feelings. But while acknowledgments of male sexuality may be censured,

mentions of female sexuality are doubly so. Nell goes against the grain of the idealized female when she freely discusses her feelings of sexual longing. This further allows for censorious readers such as Jewsbury and Trollope to categorize Nell as immoral when she merely acts human.

Victorian critics of *Cometh Up* continually indicate unease with the very topic of female sexuality. Margaret Oliphant's unsigned editorial, "Novels" (1867), focuses on concerns about female immorality—appearing by way of female longing and desire—in the fiction of the day. With "Novels," published in *Blackwood's* the same year that *Cometh Up* appeared, Oliphant looks to vice as portrayed in sensation fiction. The longing and desire of the mock-heroine whom Oliphant goes on to critique may well refer to the red-haired Nell, since Oliphant pokes fun at a generic heroine with "the amber hair and undulating form, the warm flesh and glowing colour" (259). Though Oliphant does not much concern herself with sensation novels' depictions of vice through such plot devices as murder or bigamy, she considers the physicality and literal sensation portrayed in certain novels to be extremely problematic. Oliphant's anxiety regarding sensation novels rests with the unladylike characters depicted in them, characters whose actions could potentially negatively influence young Victorian women. Since fiction has the ability to permeate even the strictest boundaries, Oliphant's particular preoccupation is that "bad" fiction may be more dangerous than exposure to lived vice. Oliphant additionally draws attention to the dangers of women writing such fiction for other women: "It is women who describe those sensuous raptures—that this intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as the portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and

mental food” (259). Essentially, Oliphant takes this moment to rebuke female authors for perpetuating what she considers to be the mis-education of young English women.

Further, Oliphant has no qualms about reinforcing the sexual double standard. On the contrary, she writes, “The man who writes is at once more and less bold than the woman; he may venture on possitive [sic] criminality to give piquancy to his details, but it is the female novelist who speaks the most plainly, and whose best characters revel in a kind of innocent indecency, as does the heroine of ‘Cometh up as a Flower’” (274). For Oliphant, it is a given that men may write on immoral topics in ways that women cannot: “he *may* (emphasis added) venture on possitive [sic] criminality” for the sake of literature. Women, conversely, should not acknowledge such topics in the first place. When a woman does dare to reference any knowledge of vice, she risks being labeled as immoral, potentially ruining future marriage prospects. Through Nell, Broughton acknowledges female sexuality in a way that Oliphant cannot accept; therefore, Oliphant condemns Nell—and Broughton in turn—as indecent. Rather than face what were painful realities for countless women—being forced to marry as a form of livelihood—Oliphant looks at the world through rose-colored glasses. Oliphant’s condemnation of female authors’ depictions of vice in their texts becomes a way for Oliphant, and others in turn, to write off the experiences of women both real and fictional.

What Oliphant fails to recognize is that sensation fiction, however much it lacks in realism, still seeks to impart a larger message; moreover, the sensational does more than just entertain its readers. While some readers are drawn to the sensationalized language of Broughton’s novel, other critics use the very fact that *Cometh Up* can be called sensational to denounce the text. As Susan Bernstein explains:

The phrase “sensation fiction” describes much less a cohesive literary style or genre than a critical construction coined by the watch-dogs of dominant culture. The term indicates...anxiety about cultural production and about the permeable boundaries between serious and popular reading, between the sanctioned form of Victorian realism...and illegitimate fiction rising from underclass print culture. (222)

Bernstein’s very language here mimics Victorian apprehensions surrounding sensation fiction, *anxiety* over the genre surmounting all else. The greatest fear is that sensation fiction—itsself a sort of bastardized form of fiction that melds genres—has risen to such a degree of popularity. Bernstein points out that sensational literature goes against the grain of the “sanctioned” literature of the period; therefore, the numerous outcries against the increasingly popular genre, indicate mainly the extent to which the “watch-dogs of dominant culture” felt that they were losing control of popular tastes. Sensation fiction exerts its influence from the very fact that it permeates established boundaries of conventionality. What is more, this outcry against sensation fiction points to the real fear many Victorians had of deleterious values infiltrating their society by way of literature. By writing off the sensational genre, critics could ignore the subversive and painful topics it addressed and encourage future readers to do the same. For modern-day scholars, to ignore these subversive topics is to ignore the social concerns of the Victorian period and the push for social change that sensational novels created.

Because *Cometh Up* challenges Victorian norms of womanhood, detractors of the novel and the sensation genre alike were greatly concerned with how such texts would impact their female readership. Furthermore, critics of sensation fiction are especially anxious that readers might begin to *act* like characters within the genre, thus compounding the danger inherent in the

sensational. Not only might readers become inured to sensational themes like violence and even murder, but also they might be led to sexual promiscuity. In order to turn readers against the genre of sensation fiction, critics proposed that such literature was “bad” and even referred to it as a disease that was spreading through Victorian society. John Richard de Capel Wise, in his article “Belles Lettres” (1866), took such a stance, proposing, “Just as in the Middle Ages people were afflicted with the Dancing Mania and Lycanthropy...so now we have a Sensational Mania. Just, too, as those diseases always occurred in seasons of dearth and poverty...so does the Sensational Mania in Literature burst out only in times of mental poverty, and afflict only the most poverty stricken minds” (157). Wise here incites fear and shame in readers of sensation fiction. The popularity of the sensation genre, for Wise, indicates that there is something morally lacking in society. In order to turn readers away from the sensational, Wise suggests that there is something inherently wrong with them mentally. As Wise states, such readers are “afflicted” in mind and taste; moreover, reading sensation fiction will have physical repercussions, perhaps leading to bodily illness.

Nell provides an excellent example of how the sensational, or sensational feelings, can have physical repercussions. The fact that she wastes away (albeit from consumption) by the end of the novel upholds Wise’s notion that the sensational can cause physical illness. Moreover, Nell is literally being *afflicted* by the “poverty” of vice Wise refers to; she indulges in sensual fantasies, although she never acts on them. Nell’s suffering, however, does not stem from the fact that she has sensual feelings. Rather, it has more to do with these feelings never being realized in a sexual relationship with Dick. In this sense, Broughton works to turn Wise’s theory inside out by proposing that unfulfilled sexual desire truly causes illness.



Victorian articles denouncing sensation fiction for its degeneracy and suggesting that reading this fiction will lead to illness abound during the period. Such a preoccupation with vice in fiction suggests how very real a danger many Victorian critics of the sensational perceived the genre to be. Henry Mansel's well-known "Sensation Novels" (1863) critiques the sensation genre in much the same way as Wise's article, pointing back to the physical consequences that the reading of "bad" literature can have on the body. Mansel writes on the sensational using the clinical language of a physician discussing an ailment:

Excitement...cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid in degree, works of this class manifest themselves as belonging...to the morbid phenomena of literature—indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite. (482-483)

The term "morbid" appears several times within this short passage, as Mansel strives to frighten readers of sensation fiction away from the genre via the threat of illness, even death. Mansel's critique lines up with what is most sensational about *Cometh Up*: the sensuality of language that has the capability of creating physical reactions in readers. With musings from Nell, such as, "I take away my shielding hand from my face, which I lift shy and burning towards [Dick's]," the reader in essence receives first-row seats to Nell's budding relationship with her lover (Broughton 106). Nell situates herself as a naïve young woman who is awakening to sexual thoughts and feelings. Broughton's language of sensuality contains nothing of the corrupt imagery Mansel references; it is instead a celebration of emerging female sexuality.

Broughton permeates the text with her discussion of female sexuality to the end of *Cometh Up*. This discussion acts doubly transgressive as Nell discusses her sexual longing as a

single woman, then moves into the sensual feelings she has for a man who is not her husband. Toward the end of the novel, Nell, now a married woman, meets with Dick. Nell undoubtedly shocks readers when she begs Dick to let her run away with him. Nell's virtue barely escapes unscathed, and it does so only because Dick announces, "I won't [take you with me]...I'd sooner cut your throat than take you. Do you think it would be loving you to bring you down to a level with the scum of the earth?" (Broughton 300). Unhappy in marriage with Sir Hugh, Nell insists on taking action and risking the censure of society rather than remaining trapped as the wife of a man she does not love. Dick's moral scruples are ultimately what save Nell from complete ruin. Wise and Mansel would probably interpret this moment as the consequences of Nell's preponderance with sensuality: she has allowed herself to become so enmeshed in her own sexual longing that she throws her moral scruples to the wayside. I would not categorize Nell here as acting immorally; rather, she is desperately seeking any happiness she can find.

Rather than allowing this otherwise audacious scene to categorize the novel as more immoral than it truly is, one Victorian critic chooses to interpret this as a teachable moment. A review of *Cometh Up* that appeared in *The Spectator* (1867) reads this emotional scene between Nell and Dick as a didactic one from Broughton. The critic writes of the passage, "Miss l'Estrange, married, offers herself to her lover, but the reader feels that the offer is made under maddening mental pain, and its rejection is, for women at all events, the sternest of moral lessons" (344). This reviewer finds Nell's actions excusable because she is under extreme emotional duress at the time (again insinuating the danger inherent in sensation). More than anything, the commentator appears eager to find any redeeming quality in Nell rather than simply write her off as immoral. Also, an otherwise audacious scene is itself redeemed in the reviewer's eyes by the fact that it can be categorized as a teachable moment for female readers.

Perhaps Broughton meant this scene to be read in part through a moralistic lens; on the other hand, Nell's bold actions here reinforce her image as the heroine who goes against the grain that Flint refers to. The *Spectator* reviewer would like to read Nell's sexual invitation to Dick as made under emotional duress. Broughton, though, paints Nell as extremely unhappy in her marriage to Sir Hugh, making her plea to Dick an attempt to assume some sort of agency over the body that now belongs to her husband. In the end, the sensation genre startles readers because it rudely shatters Victorian conceptions of the idealized female, even forcing readers to the realization that this ideal never truly existed to begin with.

### III

Broughton's awareness of the criticism her novel would inevitably draw from Victorian reviewers perhaps explains Nell's continual wavering between sensuality and propriety. Just so, Nell seems ever mindful of her own potential moral shortcomings, and she constantly seeks to redeem herself by balancing her sensual longing against her need for redemption. Near the close of the novel, Nell's guilt gets the best of her. She is married to Sir Hugh, has begged Dick to run away with her, and vacillates between keeping quiet or confessing her "sin" to her husband: "I would be honest now; I had been sailing under false colours...I would tell [Hugh] how I had thrown myself into that other man's arms, and begged him...to take me away with him, to make me utterly vile and enormously happy" (301). Interestingly enough, Nell has been honest all along, especially concerning her yearning for Dick. As a married woman, though, Nell realizes it is immoral to desire a man not her husband (behavior the idealized "angel" would never sink to), thus she begins using self-censuring language. Nell juxtaposes "utterly vile" with

“enormously happy,” the former pointing to how Victorian society wants a woman to feel for stepping beyond the bounds of morality, and the latter how Nell cannot help but feel for contemplating immorality. Functioning as yet another form of self-castigation, Nell’s newfound honesty endeavors to distance herself from the sexualized imagery she has reveled in up till now, just as it works to distance Nell from Dick, or “that other man.”

Nell’s frequent wavering between morality and immorality functions as a tool for Broughton to make her two points about Victorian femininity: first, by undercutting traditional Victorian notions of the ideal woman, and second, by underlining the insufficiency of categorizing a woman as solely “good” or “bad.” Mirroring Nell’s emotional confusion, *Cometh Up* mixes genres and so underlines the fact that, like a woman, a text may represent multiple characteristics. Lindsey Faber discusses the multiple layers that comprise the narrative of the *Cometh Up*, proposing, “[Nell] presents her narrative not as a female *bildungsroman*, but as a confession...of [Nell’s] failure to resist becoming a woman, what she has been struggling against throughout the text” (157). Yet *Cometh Up* is not so much a narrative of resistance as an exploration of female identity, and of the varied roles women play—and are *made* to play—within Victorian society. Moreover, I assert that the pressures of societal and familial expectations both color and influence the actions of Broughton’s female characters. While Victorian critics read Nell’s language as overly sexualized and Dolly’s actions as villainous, Broughton underscores that, more than anything, we should interpret these women as *human*.

More recent critics of Broughton’s work have acknowledged that her books retain a vividness years after their publication, particularly for the narrative voices within them. In *Things Past* (1944), Michael Sadleir provides a mixed look at *Cometh Up* and Broughton’s first novel, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1867): “With all their callowness and snobbery and silly

ostentatious swagger, with all the French words and tags of verse and rhetoric...the books are alive. If they have the rawness and sham-cleverness of youth, they also have its freshness” (102-3). Sadleir’s points of critique and praise here are one in the same: the behaviors of Broughton’s heroines can be frustratingly immature, yet this is in part what makes them so realistic. In turn, Broughton’s portrayal of Nell does not mesh with traditional depictions of the Victorian woman but works to challenge conceptions of this ideal. Nell’s candid voice in *Cometh Up* largely contributes to the novel’s vibrancy. The Victorian reviewers who find fault with this voice reference a sort of discomfort with the novel’s frank tone; Sadleir, though, writes many years after *Cometh Up*’s publication, his points of praise suggesting that literature like Broughton’s is no longer as scandalous. Ultimately, a number of Victorian critics prefer to picture an idealized Victorian woman, one who does not and can never exist in real life, thus leading them to negate portrayals of Nell’s experience within the novel where later reviewers like Sadleir in part accept them for their realism.

Through Nell’s narration and unconventionality, and even through the character of Nell’s sister Dolly, Broughton forces readers to recognize that, like it or not, the Victorian woman is a far more flawed and *human* being than the idealized “angel in the house.” Whether or not Broughton imbues Nell with qualities she herself embodies is uncertain. During her lifetime, Broughton remained fairly secretive about herself and her social opinions. As Marilyn Wood points out in her illuminating *Rhoda Broughton: Profile of a Novelist*: “[Broughton’s] public life existed in her novels and as such was the property of thousands; her private life was exactly that, private, right to the end” (6). Wood’s use of the term “property” here nicely mimics Nell’s own dialogue in *Cometh Up* regarding women as a form of property within marriage. Moreover, we may use Broughton’s text as a way to further our understanding of her presumed stance in

areas concerning woman's place within Victorian society. Particularly, the fact that Broughton herself never married could be said to speak to her preoccupation, her uneasiness, with women's place in both courtship and marriage. *Cometh Up* evidences that Broughton had decided opinions on marriage and social issues concerning women, and the realm of the novel is where she publicly addresses these issues.

Within *Cometh Up*, Broughton takes on themes of courtship and marriage and questions them from the perspective of a female character. Through such highly charged topics, Broughton works to challenge readers' preconceived notions about the traditional female Victorian experience. For instance, Tamar Heller argues that "Broughton persistently...provoke[es] the reader to question...the sacred indissolubility of marriage" by suggesting that it does not rest upon "sacred" considerations when its motivations are social propriety or economic advancement (xxxviii). Broughton "provoking" the reader asserts itself as key here, pointing back to the fact that Broughton continually pushes her readers' conventional ways of thinking. Heller further intimates Broughton critiques the institution of marriage, which rings true, though Broughton does so in an understated of fashion. The subject of marriage looms perpetually in the background of Nell's narrative, especially as Nell realizes she will be expected to marry for money rather than love. Nell's sister Dolly further pressures her to marry for money when the chance presents itself. At one point, Dolly tells Nell, "If I could have my body left me, my nice, pretty, pleasant body, with plenty of money to keep it well fed and well dressed, I'd give my soul its *cong  *" (Broughton 234). Broughton chooses not to present Dolly as the idealized feminine figure Victorians are used to. Instead, Dolly has no scruples; she intends to marry for money, not love. In short, she acts as the antithesis of Nell's character, yet

Broughton depicts Dolly in as realistic a light as Nell. Like Nell, Dolly has flaws that Broughton lets shine through.

While Sir Hugh courts Nell, Broughton uses this experience to comment on how women are continually judged, even objectified, within Victorian society. Though mixed with humor, Nell's observations regarding woman's place in society are often poignant and even painful, as it eventually becomes understood that Nell must "sell" herself in marriage to Sir Hugh. Nell makes her aversion to marriage with Sir Hugh evident, continually introducing language imbued with imagery of women as the property of men. When Nell agrees to marry Sir Hugh, she lumps herself into the category of a literal piece of property that her husband-to-be has purchased: "I was his chattel as much as his pet lean-headed bay mare, and I felt that he had justice on his side. If he might not insinuate his arm round my waist, round whose waist might he?" (Broughton 292). Disturbingly, Nell compares herself to livestock Sir Hugh owns, underlining that, because he has paid for the item, he may treat it as he wishes. In turn, Nell balks at the idea of physical contact with Sir Hugh, where with Dick she suffuses her language with sensual terminology to highlight her longing for him. The reality of Nell's situation is certainly dire, since "justice [is] on [Sir Hugh's] side" as far as Victorian law sees it. Once Nell marries Sir Hugh, she quite literally becomes his property for life. I see Nell's references to herself as property fundamentally as a type of coping mechanism. By calling herself Sir Hugh's "chattel," even placing herself on par with his horse, Nell can distance herself emotionally from the reality of her situation. As a form of property, Nell can lessen any emotional tie to Sir Hugh that naturally stems from a close relationship—like marriage—with him.

Nell realizes she has few options regarding whom she ultimately marries; however, the language and reflections within her narrative become ways for her to have some amount of

control. Even Nell's evaluations of the people she interacts with to a point allow her to objectify those who may do the same to her. At a dinner party, Nell reflects, "Let me give a short descriptive list of the company among whom I find my lot...Sir Hugh, in broad-cloth and high good-humour; his mother in wrinkles and Point d'Alençon; a thin viscount with a handsome wife, who bore a year of her lord's income on her fat back" (Broughton 167). This list is matter-of-fact in its description of the company, so that the reader cannot help but be thrown off—albeit amused—by Nell's note that the viscount's wife "bore a year of her lord's income on her fat back." These audacious contemplations from Nell, couched in an informal tone, mimic the very objectification Nell feels in being viewed as a form of property available through marriage to the highest bidder. Here, Nell lets herself judge and objectify the party's guests, most harshly mocking the thin viscount and his indolent wife. Where she cannot exercise control over her own body within marriage, Nell can exercise control in the way she evaluates others. All this points back to Broughton's initial concern with how female morality continually falls under stringent assessment.

Broughton uses Nell's narrative shift from sensualist to repentant sinner as a way to soften Nell's "sins," and to create greater empathy between Nell and the novel's readers. While Nell's references to herself as Sir Hugh's property are understandable, the reader cannot help but be struck by how poorly Nell treats her husband, who is in reality not a bad man. Broughton works to moderate Nell's potential callousness here by making her feel guilty for the way she treats Sir Hugh. At this point in the text, Nell's narrative functions as the confessional referred to earlier by Faber. Nell must confess all her "sins" to the reader and repent before she dies. After Nell begs Dick to run away with her, Nell considers confessing this to Sir Hugh: "There was almost a relief in the idea; it would be a fit expiation for my crime" (Broughton 302).



Broughton utilizes this moment to humanize Nell for readers: she has sensual longings, but she never acts on them. While Nell wants to leave her husband, she does not and even feels guilty for the thought. Again, such a moment acts as a way for Broughton to redeem Nell's character in the eyes of readers.

Just as Nell's confessional tone draws readers in, so does her vivid narrative voice. The *Times* review (1867) of *Cometh Up* praises the uniqueness of this voice, stating, "The love-passages abound in warmth and passion. They are anything but milk-and-watery conventionalities. A real man appears before us clasping a real woman in his arms" (11). In this instance, the reviewer praises Broughton for her truthful representations of lovemaking. Broughton does not shirk from describing scenes of affection between Nell and her lover. Such language from Nell to Dick as "[I am] *yours*, if you'll have me; if not, *nobody's*" garners praise from the *Times* reviewer (Broughton 155). Moreover, Broughton does not temper "lovemaking" scenes between Dick and Nell in an effort to remain "proper." Broughton carefully shows Nell as a "real woman" who has real romantic and sexual yearnings, and Broughton displays Dick as reciprocating these feelings as a "real man." This commentator further insinuates that there is a shortage of reality in romantic literature of the period, and that readers demand more than conventional depictions of lovemaking in their novels. The *Times* reviewer praises *Cometh Up* for precisely what other critics found deplorable about the text: the overt display and discussion of female sexuality. In turn, as the reviewer notes, the novel's sensual tones lend it a freshness and sense of reality, traits that are noticeably absent from "conventional" texts of the period.

Though Nell expresses her desires frankly, she has moments that are almost apologetic, as if she were aware of the potential discomfort readers might feel in reading her narrative. These fluctuations nicely represent Broughton's point that it is nearly impossible to label a

woman as simply good *or* bad since there is a continual wavering between the two. In one such instance, Nell seeks to downplay her desire for Dick, stating,

I was not, I think, one of those fiery females, whose passions beat their affections out of the field. And really I don't think that Englishwomen are given to flaming, and burning, and melting, and being generally combustible on ordinary occasions, as we are led by one or two novelists to suppose. (Broughton 146)

This example highlights Nell's attempt to moderate and undercut her sensual language, even suggesting such language is mild in comparison to other novels of the period. Just so, Nell insists English novels and English females are simply not sensual in nature, though Nell's very words here—"fiery," "flaming, and burning, and melting"—are extremely sensual in themselves. That Nell must take the time to make these semi-apologetic observations indicates her underlying apprehension regarding how readers might interpret her story and her character. Nell's need to address sensuality in the first place suggests that she is more familiar with feelings of passion than she would like readers to believe. Further, while Nell's discussion of female sexuality and "slangy" voice acted as points of contention for Victorian critics of *Cometh Up*, Broughton utilizes Nell's otherwise easy-going first-person narrative to connect with readers from the beginning of the text. The informality of Nell's voice ultimately creates a feeling of commiseration between her and the reader. Flint touches on the relationship between Nell and her reader, when she proposes of *Cometh Up* that "[Its] reader may be implicated, placed in a position of complicity with a heroine's transgressive, yet highly understandable desires" (282). If what Flint suggests is true, that Nell's narrative creates a level of complicity with the reader, then the reader must identify with Nell or to condemn her outright.

Broughton does not paint the feelings Nell has and the choices she makes in terms of black and white; Nell is certainly flawed, yet this fact only underlines her humanity. Part of what makes Nell so unique is that she does not appear as a larger-than-life character whose morals and actions no reader can live up to. During the middle of the novel, Nell again reaches out to readers: “Why do I tell my poor little story... Will any one care to read it... Will any one... recognise in me some of their own foolish fancies and thoughts and notions, and love me for being as silly as themselves, and for owning to them that I am?” (Broughton 230). As Nell acknowledges, many readers (presumably female) may see themselves in her narrative, which serves as another way for Broughton to unify Victorian women not adhering to conventional feminine ideals. Sensation fiction’s critics, conversely, would view Nell’s narrative in the light of dissent rather than unification. For these opponents of the genre, Nell’s character presents itself as immoral and should not be emulated or indulged through reading her story.

#### IV

Although *Cometh Up* does not address a female readership only, Broughton raises issues in the book that women would find particularly relevant, even enlightening. As Lyn Pykett notes “Sensation fiction was also in many cases clearly *addressed* to women... Indeed the debate about the sensation novel reveals the fragmentation of mid-Victorian conceptions of the feminine” (32-33). As Pykett points out, Victorian concepts of the ideal woman are naturally varied. Critics like Oliphant and Jewsbury lean toward a more conservative vision of Victorian womanhood, while Broughton proposes a radically different sort of woman. In turn, novel reading opens innumerable doors for readers, exposing them to the sorts of female characters they would never

come across in real life. This is where Jewsbury and Oliphant see danger lurking: subversive *ideas* within the pages of a novel may, in theory, negatively impact society at large.

Just as Broughton sensationalizes the language of female sexuality to push more traditional readers' ways of thinking, she uses the well-known, even comfortable, genre of romance to draw readers in. In this way, Broughton constantly forces readers to reexamine their preconceived notions on the conventional and idealized Victorian woman. Romance and sensation—*feeling*—are embedded in Nell's narrative, constantly emphasizing both Nell's romantic innocence and curiosity: "I lay my head on [Dick's] breast...and my cheeks put on their rouge, which the May showers vainly endeavor to wash off. He kisses me softly, and I forget to be scandalized" (Broughton 107). This moment embodies the sensual feelings Nell comes alive to at this point in the novel. Nell positions herself as reacting to Dick's romantic overtures, while also urging them on through her subtle blushes and physical proximity. Though Nell could be branded here as acting the coquette, a woman who is brash for allowing a man not her fiancé or husband to kiss her, this scene is a sweet one, where Nell develops feelings of sexual passion. It becomes apparent that Nell cannot resist the sensual feelings she has, because she throws her morals to the wayside when she "forget[s] to be scandalized." In any case, passages like these are exactly what critics of *Cometh Up* found so audacious. Not only is Nell free in her attentions with Dick, but she feels no shame, indeed is completely candid, in reliving the sensual experience for the reader, perhaps even inviting the reader to relive the same feelings. Ultimately, Broughton pushes sensational imagery here to reinforce her point that it is not beyond the norm for a woman to have sexual feelings, but that Victorian society has nurtured this belief in her.

Although Nell in many ways acts as the anti-heroine and anti-ideal Victorian woman, she is in part redeemed by the fact that she and Dick never actually consummate their relationship. Broughton doubtless meant this to redeem Nell to some extent in readers' eyes. In turn, while Broughton is eager to push traditional boundaries, she retains some semblance of moral scruples. Regardless of these points, the fact that Nell addresses her own sensuality is problematic in the first place. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her seminal *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), proposes that there is an inherent danger in falling prey to sensual feelings: "Women subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings...which lead them shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and...plump into actual vice" (271). For Wollstonecraft, the preoccupation with sensation may lead one into vice. This reflects the reasoning of Wise and Mansel, that the sensual and sensational inevitably lead to immorality and illness.

Broughton does suggest that there is something inherently dangerous in making sensation and romantic feelings the center of one's existence. For Nell, thwarted love and an unhappy marriage literally cause her death. Nell recognizes this herself at the close of the novel: "All the love and aspirations I had to bestow had been squandered on that intense earthly passion which seemed to be eating up body and soul. It was too late to mend now, but I was sorry it had been so" (Broughton 332). While Nell's discussion of sensation and physical illness appears to align itself with criticism of the sensation genre, Broughton points to another message here. Nell cannot get beyond her fixation on a romance with Dick, which can never be fulfilled sexually or otherwise. While the argument as to whether or not Nell's sensual longing directly causes her death still stands, Nell embraces her demise at the end of the text: "I had known I could not live without [Dick], and I was not going to do so" (333). In a way, this ending, with Nell dying from

consumption, makes up for the fact that she and Dick cannot be together in life, but are able to join one another in death. Additionally, such an ending acts as a morally acceptable way for Broughton to unite the two lovers.

## V

Broughton points to a variety of concerns on the place of women in Victorian society within *Cometh Up*, making it difficult to pin down one particular message. Sally Mitchell looks back to the sentimental and romantic fiction genres to get behind authorial intent in literature. Mitchell states, “The woman’s novelists perceived—emotionally rather than intellectually—that something was wrong in their society, and they wrote—sentimentally rather than rationally—versions of both sorts of endings” (41). Broughton suggests what is “wrong” in Victorian society exists in the way women are perceived and judged, and she pushes her points about this through sensational and sentimental means. Moreover, Broughton posits that when an unconventional woman like Nell does not fit within the strictures designated by society, she risks censure and being labeled as immoral. Just so, Broughton herself invites condemnation in creating a character like Nell and addressing the topic of female sexuality in the way that she does. Broughton doubtless realizes how subversive the topics she touches on are, and this is why she attempts to soften Nell’s language and character as she does.

Regardless of Broughton’s efforts to downplay Nell’s sensual references, *Cometh Up* still stands as a bold challenge to idealized Victorian femininity. Broughton suggests that women can, and should, recognize that they are sexual beings just as much as men are. What is more, women should not be labeled immoral because they discuss, much less acknowledge, their

sexuality as Nell does in *Cometh Up*. Broughton insinuates a need for the Victorian woman to act as more than simply an “angel in the house.” She may be a sister, wife and mother, but she also exists as a lover and sexual being. Broughton’s very novel itself underlines the fact that, like a woman, a text can be many things at once: autobiography, romance, sensation novel, and confessional. Categorizing women, and novels, confines and strives to limit something that is far more complex.

Although today Broughton’s novel goes largely unrecognized, the furor it created among Victorian critics points to both its notoriety and the extreme sensitivity surrounding the topics Broughton broaches. The *Spectator* reviewer describes Broughton’s social impact in emphatic and glowing terms of praise: “She is the novelist of revolt, and it is in this revolt...that the curious charm, the nuttiness, the vanilla flavour of her tales consists” (343). As this Victorian critic proposes, Broughton’s novel has a “curious charm” that sets it apart from its Victorian counterparts. Part of this charm comes through Nell’s unconventional voice, and part through Broughton’s audacious depiction of an outspoken Victorian woman. Ultimately, Broughton uses *Cometh Up* not so much to establish a full-out revolt, but as a direct challenge to Victorian proponents of the traditional “angel in the house.” Such a feminine ideal negates portrayals of realized Victorian womanhood. Moreover, Broughton insists that Victorian women with an awareness of their own sexuality are not immoral, but instead that they are *real*.

## CHAPTER 3

“SO THE MOTHS EAT THE ERMINE:” FEMALE SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL  
CORRUPTION IN OUIDA’S *MOTHS*

Like *Cometh Up as a Flower*, Ouida’s *Moths* (1880) concerns itself with depictions of femininity and the potential corruption of the female body. *Moths*, too, was highly popular at the time of its publication, but today the novel goes more or less unrecognized in spite of the subversive topics it touches on. Ouida herself is difficult to characterize, a woman who was highly critical of the female sex—even “anti-feminist” according to some—though a number of her untraditional female characters in many ways act as precursors to the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* whom Ouida was vehemently opposed to.<sup>1</sup> *Moths* stands as Ouida’s scathing critique of high society and, in particular, the vice-ridden women who populate its uppermost echelons. Imagery of moths occurs as a leitmotif and textual device throughout the work; the novel’s title page includes the phrase, attributed by Ouida to a Biblical psalm, “like moths fretting a garment.”

The fact that Ouida remains a complex figure, who makes one statement in editorials then takes a completely different stance in her fiction, creates a difficult space in which to examine her works. As Natalie Schroeder points out, Ouida’s literature vacillates between the highly romantic and the highly cynical, thus obscuring any one true viewpoint she held on societal corruption (Introduction 20). In turn, much scholarship surrounding Ouida concentrates on the ways in which her novels reflect or uphold anti-feminist or anti-feminine beliefs, in many ways attempting to categorize her as far more conventional than she really was. It is important to understand that Ouida was not strictly anti-feminist in her sentiments, and while her editorials

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<sup>1</sup> For further reference to scholars who have discussed Ouida in terms of anti-feminism see Gilbert, “Ouida and the Other New Woman” 170; Schaffer “ ‘Nothing but Foolscap’ ” 42.



often censured advocates for women's rights, her fiction frequently assumes an opposing stance. Pamela Gilbert examines the strange middle ground Ouida inhabits by suggesting,

Ouida is a believer in aristocratic privilege; her reasons, however, are embedded in notions of eugenics which inform much New Woman writing...Her partisanship of animal rights is specifically connected to women's abuse...as it often is in New Woman fiction...In short, Ouida's conservatism is formulated through a radical rhetoric. ("Ouida and the Other" 170)

As Gilbert acknowledges, though, Ouida was vocal in denouncing the New Woman, even if many of her female characters seem to represent this figure. Talia Schaffer and Gilbert point out that Ouida's denunciation of the New Woman acts as a clever way to draw attention from Ouida's own unconventional lifestyle (Schaffer, " 'Nothing but Foolscap'" 46; Gilbert "Ouida and the Other" 170). Ouida never married, wrote for a living, and was known to give lavish parties where she entertained more men than women. In many ways Ouida's own life aligns with the idealized New Woman figure, incredibly individualistic and independent. More to the point, whether or not Ouida sympathized with the New Woman, in *Moths* she provides a subversive critique of Victorian society's propensity to exploit the female body and reject the possibility of a legitimate female sexuality.

My assertion here is that the high society that heroine Vere is forced to become part of never allows her control of her own physical or sexual being, but continually commodifies this being by objectifying her and placing her under the power of person after person—first Vere's mother, then her husband, and eventually her second husband. While scholarship on Ouida has increased in recent years, critics have not examined the constant commodification of Vere's literal body throughout *Moths*. What is more, it is important to acknowledge just how subversive

Ouida's text is in addressing female sexuality to begin with. Victorian critical reactions to Ouida's texts often reflect a concern with impropriety, at times outright denigrating her literature for its blatant treatment of corrupt topics and often downplaying it for poor characterization and lack of realism. For these reasons, it is helpful to examine what it is about Ouida's literature that critics found so problematic, especially since many of their points of criticism shy away from addressing the truly progressive arguments she makes. As with *Cometh Up as a Flower*, Victorian reviewers focused on the immoral aspects of Ouida's novels as a way to easily devalue her work altogether. Like *Cometh Up*, *Moths* cannot strictly be categorized as sensational, though Ouida's depictions of the marital abuse Vere suffers would fall under these lines. What the majority of Victorian critics found problematic about *Moths* was the scathing way Ouida chose to depict society within its pages, calling this society out for fundamentally treating their young women like prostitutes within the realm of the marriage market. Interestingly, many of the negative reviewers of *Moths* unwittingly place themselves in the same category as the high society members Ouida denounces, since they refuse to acknowledge the veracity of the marriage market practices she describes. Furthermore, Ouida sees herself as a sort of crusader who is exposing the vice-ridden practices of society men and women in her novel, where her critics denounce such portrayals, calling them unrealistic. Jane Jordan asserts that Ouida's fiction was often equated with that of risqué French literature from authors like Zola and George Sand, again effectively downplaying the literary merit of Ouida's works by branding them as solely scandalous ("English George Sand" 107).

The fact that Ouida has frequently been pigeonholed as both anti-feminist and anti-New Woman makes her blatant critiques of society's treatment of female sexuality in *Moths* all the more fascinating. Gilbert, though she does not actually consider *Moths* in her study, touches on

Ouida's concern with society's frequent commodification of the female body: " 'Good' women...rarely escape unscathed. Against their will, they must enter the realm of exchange, into which they are inexorably drawn, thus losing their identities as subjects, a process figured as the opening of their bodies by sex, violence, and illness" (*Disease* 141). The ability of Vere, the heroine of *Moths*, to retain her identity as a morally upright woman in the midst of social corruption is the primary concern of the novel. As Vere's love-interest, Corrèze, entreats her early in the text, in a passage that gives the novel its title, "Try and keep yourself 'unspotted from the world'...this world you will be launched in does no woman good. It is a world of moths. Half the moths are burning themselves in feverish frailty, the other half are corroding and consuming all that they touch" (97). What goes unsaid here is the underlying notion that staying "unspotted from the world" means remaining sexually unblemished. A number of the primary male characters in *Moths*, Corrèze and Vere's husband Zouroff in particular, concern themselves with the topic of Vere's sexuality. What these men particularly want to control is just how sexually corrupt Vere does or does not become.

Ultimately, through *Moths* I see Ouida blatantly critiquing high society's drive to pervert female sexuality by way of constant moral and physical corruption. Ouida suggests this need to corrupt the female body is most often directly linked to young women's commodification in the marriage market. Moreover, as Ouida shows through the example of Vere, men "buy" wives with the intent to treat them like prostitutes, a point Ouida brings up again and again throughout the novel. I do not necessarily see Ouida as critiquing British society alone, as *Moths* never actually takes place in England. The various characters Ouida critiques are a mix of British, Russian, and French, among others, in all their parts forming the high society she rebukes. This suggests that Ouida views the issue of female commodification as reaching farther than one

particular cultural group. On the other hand, by placing the British Vere at the center of the story, and making her the victim of sexual exploitation, Ouida creates a character her British readers may be more willing to empathize with, literally an innocent abroad.

Ouida maintains Vere's air of naïveté throughout the text, even after the reader is essentially told that her husband has sexually abused her. While Ouida in no way makes a push for an unmarried woman's sexual freedom, she does acknowledge just how problematic it is that men, even those as seemingly innocuous as Corrèze, seek to regulate and exploit female sexuality. What becomes apparent through Vere's continual subjugation throughout the novel is that the high society Ouida critiques allows women little to no space to explore their sexuality naturally. Quite simply, Vere is a woman with few, or maybe no, options for exercising control over her own body.

## I

*Moths* centers on the naïve and morally upstanding Vere Herbert, a heroine with a masculine name and an unfashionable appearance at the start of the text, clothed in “brown holland naked and not ashamed, unadorned and barbaric” (52). Raised by her paternal grandmother in Scotland, at the beginning of *Moths* Vere is sent to live with her frivolous mother, Lady Dolly, in France. This first scene where the horror-stricken Dolly sees Vere, unaffected and wearing unfashionable clothing, makes it possible for Ouida to emphasize just how innocent Vere is before her introduction to a high society that will try to exploit her very person. Ouida insinuates in this moment that “naked” and “unadorned” are more beautiful because they have not yet been adulterated and perverted from their natural forms. Moreover,

the only person embarrassed by Vere's outdated attire here is her mother, where lookers-on are drawn to the attractiveness of Vere's form and face. As Ouida sees it, the high society Dolly wants Vere to become part of has become so used to dissimulation and artificiality that it fails to appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds it. Dolly, attempting to indoctrinate Vere into this society, forces her to attend various social functions only after she has completely made over Vere's wardrobe. Ultimately, Vere's entrance into society is just as equally an entrance into the marriage market, signaling her availability to be more or less sold into marriage.

Ouida continually uses abuses enacted on Vere to highlight her lack of agency within the society she describes. When Vere is sent to live with her mother, Lady Dolly's first thought centers on how she can best make use of Vere: "What could she do with a daughter just sixteen years old?" (48). From the start, Dolly's concern with *how to use* Vere objectifies her. For Dolly, the natural answer is to marry Vere off, a task Dolly finds easier said than done. Because Vere initially resists being married off, Dolly appeals to Lady Stroat, a seasoned society matron, to pressure Vere. Ouida depicts Lady Stroat as crafty as her namesake, the stoat or weasel: "She was very successful with girls. She never scolded them; she never ridiculed them; she only influenced them in a gentle, imperceptible, sure way that, little by little, made them feel that love and honour were silly things, and that all that really mattered was to have rank and to be rich" (110). In other words, Lady Stroat is responsible for manipulating and indoctrinating young girls into societal vice. Ouida, though, writes Vere as being impervious to the machinations of her mother and Lady Stroat. While Dolly eventually manages to coerce Vere to marry a dissolute Russian prince named Zouroff, Vere only does so because she falsely believes her mother owes him a great deal of money, and in this sense she passes from objectification to commodification. The discussion of commodifying Vere pervades this portion of the book: Vere sees herself as

being sold to Zouroff, Dolly sees herself as selling Vere to Zouroff, and Zouroff actually believes Vere has agreed to marry him because of his wealth. In a final blow, Vere's grandmother in Scotland renounces her for the fact that she too believes Vere is selling herself to Zouroff. This grandmother, in a letter, is one of the first to put Vere on a level with a prostitute, avowing, "I pity you, and I despise you; for when you give yourself to a man whom you cannot honour or love, you are no better than the shameless women that a few weeks ago I would no more have named to you than I would have struck you a buffet on your cheek" (191). What the grandmother finds most offensive, yet leaves unsaid, is that she sees the marriage of Vere to Zouroff quite simply as an exchange of sex for money. Without affection from either party, the union of Vere and Zouroff becomes a form of legalized prostitution, which is exactly how Ouida wants this Vere's ordeal to be read.

After their marriage, Zouroff makes every attempt to change Vere's identity, both in altering her name from Vere to the feminized Vera, and in constantly trying to morally corrupt her. These attempts reflect Dolly's earlier quandary over how best to "use" Vere; for both Zouroff and Dolly, Vere is an object to be manipulated and molded. In the meantime, Vere forms a friendship with the famous opera singer Corrèze, a relationship that turns eventually to romance though the married Vere staunchly refuses to act on her feelings. The bulk of the novel centers on Vere's marriage to Zouroff, who abuses her mentally and physically while continually parading his numerous mistresses (Vere's own mother a past example) before her. The plot takes a turn when Vere discovers Zouroff has been having an affair within her own home with Jeanne, a married society woman Vere considered a friend. Feeling vindictive because Vere now thinks badly of her, Jeanne urges Zouroff to make efforts to ruin Vere's reputation. Zouroff, in spite of his previous attempts to physically corrupt Vere, feels guilty:

All that there had been of manliness in Sergius Zouroff's nature resisted [Jeanne] in this thing that she sought; he still had a faith in his wife that his anger against her did not change; in his eyes Vere was purity incarnate... To ruin by open doubt and calumnious accusation a creature he knew to be sinless, seemed to him so vile that he could not bring himself to do an act so base. (490)

For Zouroff, Vere's seeming impermeability to vice over the course of the novel makes her into an almost otherworldly figure, representative of "purity incarnate." In turn, while Zouroff might attempt to degrade Vere's body, Ouida suggests there is still an inherent purity to her that even Zouroff and Jeanne cannot touch. Because Vere refuses to associate further with Jeanne, and Zouroff will not end his relationship with her, Vere is ultimately forced into self-exile at a remote estate in Poland. In the end, following a series of dramatic plot twists, Zouroff annuls his marriage to Vere in order to marry Jeanne, a woman as morally corrupt as he. This allows Vere and Corrèze to marry, and the novel ends with their retreat from society into the Alps.

Although Zouroff and Vere are divorced at the end of the text, Vere's ensuing marriage to Corrèze signals the fact that Vere's identity is once again subsumed into her husband's. Truly, the conclusion to *Moths* cannot be called triumphant, as Vere is psychologically scarred, Corrèze can no longer sing due to an injury that Zouroff has inflicted on him, and society dictates that Lady Dolly cannot visit her divorced daughter. Schroeder and Holt, though, read Vere and Corrèze's self-exile as a victorious escape from a society that has delighted in commodifying them both: "Their transcendent new life together is marked by the complete absence of the social spectacle that dominates the novel... in Vere's triumph over tyrannical gender codes, Ouida likewise offers a utopian vision of escape from a culture made oppressive by its unbridled, feverish need for acquisition and display" (195). Though Vere does manage to escape an

abusive marriage, Ouida's point by the close of the novel is that Vere cannot likewise escape the degrading effects of the "moths." Ouida suggests that, morally upright though Vere may be, she is not immune to the corruptive force of Victorian society. As the last line of *Moths* bleakly asserts, "So the moths eat the ermine; and the world kisses the leper on both cheeks" (543). Moreover, the "moths" that constitute society have the ability to corrupt even virtuous individuals like Vere, the "ermine;" at the same time, society continues to embrace and even to celebrate those who are corrupt to begin with. Just because Vere literally takes herself outside the scope of society, her remarriage to Corrèze suggests she will still continue to uphold this society's mores by subscribing to the dictates of her lawful husband, her person again relegated to another's control.

Ouida's portrayals of Vere being passed from person to person reinforce her censure of society for allowing women few to no means for true independence beyond their natal family and husband. Victorian critics of Ouida's novel found fault with such unsettling depictions of society, leading many to condemn them as inaccurate. In spite of the fact that Ouida writes in a deliberately scandalous fashion to point out societal shortcomings, these critics ignored her assessment of society or brushed it aside for being erroneous. In his essay "Profligacy in Fiction" (1880), A. K. Fiske does not bother to parse out Ouida's argument with society, but instead simply finds fault with her representation of society as a whole, thus merely skimming the surface of Ouida's book. Fiske asserts, "[Ouida] owes society a grudge, possibly because society, whatever secret guiltiness may lurk in its most pretentious walks, is not openly tolerant of a disregard of the canons of morality, whose outer bulwark is conventionality" (83). The greatest fault Fiske finds with Ouida's novel is that her portrayal of Victorian society is so negative, when that society is "healthier" than Ouida allows. Fiske's article, while admitting that



societal perversions exist, largely attempts to brush these aside. Ouida's denunciation of society in *Moths*, decrying the manipulation of female sexuality within marriage and without, advocates for women's rights whether Ouida actually intends to do so or not. Indeed, while Fiske never discusses Ouida as an activist, part of his uneasiness with her portrayal of society in *Moths* may be related to the flagrant nature in which she touches on issues of women's rights.

Although Ouida progressively approaches topics of women's rights in *Moths*, she still castigates society women in the text, and women generally in her various editorials. In her well-known essay "The New Woman" (1894), Ouida frankly censures the female sex, writing, "The error of the New Woman (as of many an old one) lies in speaking of women as the victims of men, and entirely ignoring the frequency with which men are the victims of women. In nine cases out of ten the first to corrupt the youth is the woman. In nine cases out of ten also she becomes corrupt herself because she likes it" (*Views* 215). Ouida seems mainly to refer to sexual corruption, while at the same time she acknowledges the love for decadence that women like Lady Dolly indulge in, which can in turn lead to greater vices. Vere proves the exception to the rule of women enjoying their own corruption, as Ouida may have been herself. Just so, Ouida was known to socialize more with men than with women. In her memoir of Ouida, Lee notes that Ouida invited a majority of male guests to her dinner parties with an agenda in mind: gleaning information from them. As Lee writes, "She was once asked how she knew so much of life, and especially of men's lives. She replied, 'I hear a sentence and that illuminates all'" (43-4).

This study of men's lives acts as Ouida's effort to imbue her work with a sense of realism, yet Victorian reviewers essentially ignored the reality of the situations Ouida depicts and lambasted her for her inaccuracy. Max Beerbohm, in an article titled "Ouida" (1897) and later

reprinted in *More* (1921), lauds Ouida for her plots and wit, but downplays the literary merit of her texts by labeling them as entertaining romances. Like many of Ouida's other Victorian critics, Beerbohm finds the dimensionality of Ouida's characters lacking: "Her men and women of Mayfair are shadows...and she reproduces real life only when she is dealing with childish or half-savage natures" (110). As Beerbohm notes, Ouida does make use of over-exaggeration and sensationalism in order to vivify her characters and create the plotline in *Moths*; however, this serves as a technique for her to draw attention to the weighty concerns she touches on, prime among these female sexuality and marital abuse. Conversely, Ouida herself, in addressing a critical review of *Moths*, insists her novel presents a strictly truthful account of the state of society rather than an embellished one. Ouida contends, "As regards the prodigality of the modes of living that I have described, I cannot admit that there is the slightest exaggeration of my own there. I have, indeed, described nothing that I have not seen, and it would be impossible for any one to exaggerate the caprices and the splendor of a great Russian" ("Moths" 5). Moreover, not only are the "modes of living" Ouida depicts in *Moths* truthful, but so are the horrors regarding a wife's exploitation within marriage. In the sense that she firmly decries women's place in the marriage market and within marriage, this is an instance where Ouida could be termed progressive on the topic of women's rights.

## II

Ouida uses the trials of the conventional and naïve Vere to highlight the subversive message she means to push about the corruptive force of society on the especially innocent female. Though not necessarily one of the "shadows" Beerbohm refers to, Vere acts as the

clichéd epitome of feminine purity and beauty, in many ways an untouchable ice-princess. Indeed Corrèze, though in admiration, eventually likens her beauty to that of a rare flower that can only be found in a specific location in the high altitude of the Alps. In juxtaposition, Ouida presents the beauty of Lady Dolly, Vere's mother, as completely artificial: "Lady Dolly had always been, and was very pretty... When she was seventeen... amongst the rosebuds on the lawn, she had been a rosebud herself; now she was a Dresden statuette" (60). Lady Dolly has come to embrace the corrupt society she lives in, and this is exactly Ouida's point in drawing her as the artificial foil to Vere's untainted and natural beauty. Much more recently, Stirling has reached a similar conclusion about Vere's lack of depth, calling her "a heroine noble in proportions but ice-cream in substance" (134). Of importance here is not so much the fact that Vere may be one-dimensional but that Ouida means her to represent a woman whose moral identity and sexuality have not yet been blighted by a society that takes pleasure in the act of moral corruption. Further, Ouida's characterization of Vere as naïve and innocent positions Vere as a traditional female heroine whom readers may be more apt to empathize with. Schroeder notes that Vere's traditional representation likely reflects an agenda, asserting, "Most of... Ouida's reviewers judged [her] novels in terms of how the female characters measured up to conventional standards of femininity. If a female was aggressive, she was demonic or unrealistic; if her aggressiveness was countered by redeeming feminine weakness, she was forgiven" ("Feminine Sensationalism" 100). Although critics of *Moths* find fault with the characters' lack of depth, they cannot find fault with the actions of the morally respectable Vere, who is as idealized a female character as a reviewer such as Oliphant could ask for: she listens to her mother, is faithful to her husband, and refuses to succumb to any of society's amoral practices.

Ouida's over-exaggeration of vice-ridden characters like Lady Dolly and Zouroff serves the simple purpose of providing a distinct contrast to Vere's idealized feminine innocence. In a similar fashion, Ouida intends to shock readers when she discusses the degraded social practices that surround the naïve Vere once she enters into the world of high society. Vere's own mother ushers her into this morally questionable world:

[Vere] was taken to the Casino, where the highborn young girls of her own age read, or worked, or played with the *petits chevaux* [ponies]; she was made to walk up and down the planks, where her innocence brushed the shoulders of Casse-une-croûte, the last new villainy out in woman, and her fair cheeks felt the same sunbeams and breeze that fell on all the faded *pêches à quinze sous* [old peaches that sell for fifteen cents]. (*Moths* 111)

Schroeder's editorial notes at this point in the text underline that both "Casse-une-croûte" and "*pêches à quinze sous*" are references to prostitutes. Casse-une-croûte also appears later in the novel as the name of one of Zouroff's mistresses. Ouida does not necessarily mean for these references to prostitution to be read literally, but she does suggest that the sexual promiscuity of society women like Lady Dolly brings them down to the level of women who profit from sex. Just so, Ouida criticizes the fact that innocent young girls like Vere are more or less thrown to the wolves and made to "brush shoulders" with society women who revel in vice, allowing for a perpetual cycle of young girls being indoctrinated into the corrupt world of the "moths."

This moment is also one of the many in the text where Ouida places female sexuality on par with fruit, effectively suggesting the two may be viewed interchangeably as commodities within the "market" of Victorian high society. Over and over, comparisons are made between Vere and youthful fruit or flowers, emphasizing her ripening sexuality. When Corrèze urges

Vere to “remain unspotted” he recognizes the potential draw and even perceived value her fresh sexuality will provide to more seasoned members of society such as Zouroff. After one of Corrèze’s early interactions with Vere, he first views her on a purely physical level before questioning how a corrupt society may affect her psychologically: “How sweet she is now; sweet as the sweetbriar, and as healthy... She will be surprised, shocked, pained; then, little by little, she will get used to it all—they all do—and then the world will have her, body and soul” (*Moths* 93-4). Corrèze’s focus in this instance rests largely on Vere’s physical attributes and, implicitly, her sexuality; for the moment, she is sweet and healthy, unblemished by sexual corruption or sexual disease. Hinted at, in turn, is Corrèze’s own disappointment that a degenerate society, not he, will be the one to “have her.” Corrèze often attempts to temper his desire for Vere by couching this in tones of concern for Vere’s well-being and the over-arching desire that she “remain unspotted.”

Corrèze in many ways acts as the masculine version of Ouida (at least as she would have herself portrayed): noble, artistically talented, and possessed of unquestionable morals. In her introduction to *Moths*, Schroeder states that Ouida in fact modeled Corrèze after a real-life singer named Mario whom she was infatuated with (10-11). Whether or not this is true, Corrèze evokes his creator, perhaps standing as Ouida’s masculine ideal. Additionally, like Ouida, Corrèze exhibits distaste for Victorian high society women and at times the female sex as a whole. The narrator remarks:

Corrèze did not esteem women highly. They had caressed him into satiety, and wooed him till his gratitude was more than half contempt; but in his innermost heart, where his old faiths dwelt unseen by even his best friends, there was the

fancy of what a woman should be, might be, unspotted by the world, and innocent in thought, as well as deed. (*Moths* 105-6)

Such an example again evokes just how much potential worth a woman “innocent in thought, as well as deed” has within society. Corrèze has little faith that Vere can remain “unspotted” long; furthermore, once she allows herself to be corrupted, or rather sexually initiated, her value is negated.

The possibility of exploiting Vere sexually is exactly what draws Zouroff to her in the first place. Although Lady Dolly works to negotiate a marriage deal between Zouroff and Vere, in the end she resorts to trickery to gain Vere’s consent. What is more, Vere agrees to marry Zouroff because she thinks her mother owes him money, which is not true. Zouroff, in turn, believes Vere has married him for his wealth, thus he feels no remorse in emotionally and physically abusing Vere since he has in essence “purchased” her. Once Zouroff decides to marry Vere, he regards the courtship process as a matter of making a transaction: “He was ready to pay a high price for innocence, because it was a new toy that pleased him. But he never thought that it would last, any more than the bloom lasts on the peach. He had no illusions. Since it would be agreeable to brush it off himself, he was ready to purchase it” (176). Yet again Vere’s sexuality is compared to ripe fruit, relegating her to the status of an object to be plucked or purchased, consumed and used up, completely disregarding any agency she has over her own sexuality. More, like fruit, Zouroff sees Vere’s sexuality as a perishable commodity; once it has lost its “bloom,” it no longer has value in its particular market. Zouroff is in many ways similar to Corrèze, most especially in his concern that he be the one to control Vere’s level of physical corruption. Where Ouida typically tempers Corrèze’s language regarding Vere’s sexuality,

making him seem more concerned for Vere's well-being rather than strictly desirous of her, Zouroff acknowledges that he actually wants to possess Vere.

Ouida's editorial "The New Woman" places the scenario of the abusive husband and the innocent wife in a completely different light than that represented by Zouroff and Vere, creating another example of how Ouida's novels and essays were often at odds with one another. In "The New Woman," Ouida states, "A worse prostitution than that of the streets, i.e, that of loveless marriages of convenience, are brought about by women, not by men. In such unions the man always gives much more than he gains, and the woman in almost every instance is persuaded or driven into it by women—her mother, her sisters, her acquaintances" (615). Ouida certainly means for Vere's marriage to Zouroff to be read as a high-class form of prostitution; however, Ouida here makes the man out to be more a victim of women than is truly the case within *Moths*. On the other hand, Ouida correctly identifies that women may drive other women into unhappy marriages, as Lady Dolly does to Vere. What becomes so troubling about this kind of persuasion, though, is that Ouida essentially negates any agency Vere or other young women possess in making important life decisions. Corrèze and Zouroff likewise presume that Vere is unable to assume control over her own sexuality, thus leading to Corrèze's constant reminders for her to remain uncorrupted and Zouroff's desire to debase Vere himself. Gilbert recognizes that a number of Ouida's other novels also deal with the topic of female sexuality. Gilbert states, "Like many other Victorian novelists, Ouida attacks the notion of marriage for wealth as prostitution; however, unlike most of them, and much like the New Women novelists later, she valorizes women's sexuality and love outside of marriage, and sees the social constraints placed on women's sexuality as contributing to their moral decay" ("Ouida and the Other" 184). In *Moths*, Vere never acknowledges her own sexuality, nor does Ouida allow her to; moreover,

Vere's sexuality is most often referred to by others—men especially—and is never quite within the control of Vere herself. Gilbert's comment suggests that, were Vere able to explore her own sexuality, were she even to have *control* of it in the first place, she would perhaps become impervious to the corruption that surrounds her.

### III

Because Vere stands for the conventional Victorian female, fundamentally perfect in her beauty and innocence, Ouida in many ways does not impart to her the sense of agency given to bolder female characters in her earlier society novels. Like Ouida's positioning of herself as anti-feminine and anti-New Woman, her representation of Vere as submissive can be read as having a particular agenda. Not only would situating Vere as the naively traditional Victorian woman have helped to make her more palatable to many readers, but her innocence only makes the brutalities she suffers in the novel that much more glaring. Readers today, though, may have a difficult time empathizing with Vere because she exercises so little control over her own person. As Schaffer notes, "Vere is an eminently passive heroine whom mother and husband and lover manipulate...Her only tool against the threatening world is her feminine passivity, and she utilizes it until she becomes virtually autistic" (*Forgotten Female* 128-9). Shaffer asserts correctly that Vere allows herself to be manipulated by Lady Dolly, Zouroff, and even Corrèze. Indeed, the bulk of the novel is made up of the trials Vere undergoes simply because she either cannot or will not stand up for herself. On the other hand, Schaffer implies that Vere consciously makes use of her passivity, in this sense assuming power over herself in the only way she feels able, even if this becomes psychologically harmful. I read Vere's passivity as



being largely reactionary, a sort of knee-jerk response to the physical and mental turmoil she is subject to. Additionally, much of this turmoil stems from the fact that Vere's sexuality, and essentially her entire being, is constantly being commodified and exploited by others.

A concern with the exploitation of the female body has been an issue of long-standing, and Ouida's discussion of it reflects a conversation that began at least as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). There, Wollstonecraft acknowledges that, not only are women exploited for the sake of the marriage market, but they are also in many ways commodifying themselves. Wollstonecraft states in the introduction to her text,

It is acknowledged that [women] spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves,—the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act. (74)

The main point here is that women are conditioned to look to marriage as their only option for future security. Thus most of the skills women are urged to acquire in some fashion work toward bettering these marriage prospects. Luckily for Vere, her pragmatic grandmother has raised her until the age of sixteen; only when Vere is sent to Lady Dolly does she feel pressure to act like the “mere animal” Wollstonecraft describes. As Zouroff does later, Lady Dolly pressures Vere to be less morally upright, suggesting she wear makeup and dress in a revealing bathing costume when at the beach. The irony recognized by Ouida and Wollstonecraft, of course, is that the most cultured members of high society are often the ones who act the *least* cultured. Ouida,

though, makes Vere largely impervious to the corruptive forces around her. While Vere outwardly appears to be a strictly conventional representation of Victorian femininity, her impermeability to vice makes her a force to be reckoned with.

Although Vere adheres to her moral scruples throughout *Moths*, this does not save her from being subsumed into the marriage market and ultimately “sold” to Zouroff. Marie Corelli, in *The Modern Marriage Market* (1898), echoes Ouida’s position that marriages like Vere’s should not be made for the sake of convenience. Corelli ties in the oft-used language of marriage as a form of prostitution when there is no emotional bond between individuals: “Marriage is nothing more nor less a crime if it is entered upon without that mutual supreme attraction and deep love which makes the union sacred. It is a selling of body into slavery—it is a dragging down of souls into impurity” (43). Corelli’s “dragging down of souls into impurity” nearly exactly lines up with what happens to Vere in Ouida’s novel. In turn, Zouroff thinks he has purchased his wife and so feels more inclined to treat her as a commodity, or as he would treat one of his paid mistresses. As Vere’s husband Zouroff further presumes that he holds power over her sexuality and her actual body, and he takes a perverse delight in subjecting Vere to different forms of degradation: “It amused him to lower her, morally and physically, and he cast all the naked truths of human vices before her shrinking mind, as he made her body tremble at his touch...Like many another man, he never asked himself how the fidelity and the chastity that he still expected to have preserved for him, would survive his own work of destruction” (*Moths* 225). Fundamentally, Zouroff wants Vere to become as corrupt as he is himself. Ouida wryly points out, however, that Zouroff focuses so much on abusing Vere that he never considers the possible ramifications of his education. Later in the novel, the society Vere is made to associate with assumes she and Corrèze have become lovers though they have not. Like Zouroff, this

society *wants* to see Vere corrupted, “That under the snow there should be mud; that at the heart of the wildrose there should not be one worm, but many; that the edelweiss should be rotten and worthless after all—what joy! The imagined joy of angels over one who repents can never be one-thousandth part so sweet and strong as the actual joy of sinners over one purity that falls” (444). Throughout the text Vere’s purity has most often been a draw, something that increases her value in the eyes of a disillusioned culture, but after Vere’s marriage and indoctrination into social corruption she is expected and encouraged to be as dissolute as those around her. When she does not live up to these expectations, Vere is scorned for her innocence rather than for her corruption.

Vere’s conventionality and timidity, as well as her acceptance of these traits, in turn allow her to remain Zouroff’s passive subject through much of *Moths*. Due to Zouroff’s adultery and cruelty, Vere does technically have grounds to seek a divorce. Mary Lyndon Shanley underlines that the 1857 Divorce Act made it possible for a woman to pursue divorce, but only through a very narrow set of circumstances. Where a husband could divorce his wife purely due to her adultery, a wife had to prove her husband’s adultery plus another from of cruelty. As Shanley points out, “From a list that included rape, sodomy, desertion, transportation, penal servitude, incest, bigamy, and cruelty [the House of Lords] accepted only the last three, indicating that they did not regard crimes of sexual violence or prolonged absence by the husband as fatal to the marriage bond” (42). Moreover, in simply bringing the matter of adultery before a court, a married couple’s sexual practices are placed under the lens of the public, and this is exactly what Vere fears. When Vere’s sister-in-law questions why she does not seek a separation from Zouroff, Vere answers, “The woman who can wish for a divorce and drag her wrongs into public—such wrongs!—is already a wanton herself; at least I think so” (*Moths* 422).

Vere recognizes that Zouroff has already sexually manipulated her (an act made legally possible by marriage), and were she to pursue a divorce the marital abuses she has had to endure would be made public.

The sensational aspects of divorce cases riveted the Victorian public, as Barbara Leckie notes: “The legal context of the divorce court provided one of the few Victorian forums in which participants were urged to speak about sex; the publication of these divorce cases in daily newspapers, moreover, made them readily available to diverse readers” (62). At the point in *Moths* where Vere mentions divorce, she has already been treated as an object of sexual exchange by Lady Dolly and abused by Zouroff, so it follows that she in no way wants her sexuality to be placed on display in a public trial. In the end, Vere permits Zouroff more or less to exile her to one of his remote Polish estates, where her health begins to decline. After a dramatic turn of events in which Zouroff shoots Corrèze, Vere flees Poland to be with Corrèze, effectively spurning Zouroff. Zouroff then annuls his marriage to Vere, marrying his mistress, and leaving Vere free to marry Corrèze. This conclusion, then, cannot be read as a victory for Vere since she escapes the hold of Zouroff only to place herself in the hands of Corrèze who, though arguably kinder than Vere’s first husband, likewise seeks to control her sexually.

#### IV

Ultimately, Ouida’s conclusions about Victorian society at the close of *Moths* are deeply cynical. Since Vere’s “triumph” over society consists of her self-exile from it, Ouida offers no solution to the novel’s overarching concern with societal corruption. Before she hides herself away from Victorian culture, Vere has an encounter with a foreign diplomat whose censure of

societal values in certain ways aligns with Ouida's. On learning that Zouroff has criticized Vere for not being more flirtatious with other men, this diplomat exclaims, "Good God! what an age we live in...In which a husband makes it a reproach to his wife that she does not understand how to attract other men! I do believe that we have sunk lower than the Romans of the empire; they did draw a line between the wife and the concubine. We don't draw any" (362). Such a statement circles back to Ouida's criticism of male attempts to exercise control over female sexuality. In a fashion that revisits Ouida's earlier concerns about the commodification of the female body in Victorian society, this speaker recognizes that the roles of the wife and prostitute may easily be conflated. Much of Ouida's anxiety throughout *Moths* centers exactly on this conflation. For Ouida, the commodification and exploitation of the wife's body—often by the husband, but not always—acts as a societal perversion that must be abolished. Just how Ouida intends this practice be eliminated, though, is never clear in *Moths*, particularly since Vere at no point escapes the bounds of male dominance.

While I read the conclusion of *Moths* as a bleak one, scholars like Schroeder and Holt have deemed it triumphant since Vere escapes a corrupt society (195). On the other hand, this may be another instance of Ouida's ambivalence creeping into the text. This ambivalence presents itself in *Views and Opinions* (1895), a collection of essays on various social issues, where Ouida assumes a far less censorious stance with regard to social corruption: "At the risk of arousing the censure of readers, I confess that I would leave to society a very large liberty in the matter of its morality or immorality, if it would only justify its existence by any originality, any grace, any true light and loveliness" (4). This statement takes a step back from the moralizing tone Ouida adopts in *Moths*, forgoing any discussion of society's potential ill effects on the individual (and women in particular) due to social immorality. On the other hand, one

may argue that in Vere's innocence and conventionality Ouida sees originality, "light and loveliness." *Moths*, then, is a tragedy as the society portrayed in its pages in no way allows such originality of character to "remain unspotted."

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

Neither Broughton nor Ouida would necessarily want to have been labeled “progressive” because of the fiction she produced. But it is hard not to see their novels as having paved the way for the New Woman novels—alongside the novels of Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell—that emerged near the end of the Victorian period. The New Woman is typically viewed as an early feminist figure who advocated improved education and rational dress for women, as well as urged that women be afforded more rights within marriage. In turn, New Women such as Sarah Grand critiqued lax male sexual practices and women’s lack of sex education, emphasizing that men were passing sexually transmitted diseases to their unsuspecting wives. Ultimately, Broughton’s push to normalize a discussion of female sexuality in *Cometh Up*, and Ouida’s censure of manipulated female sexuality in *Moths*, are conversations at the heart of later self-affiliated New Woman authors, whether these authors broach such topics directly or indirectly.

Current scholars have certainly made this connection to the New Woman as well, particularly with regard to the works of Ouida. As Pamela Gilbert remarks, “Many of Ouida’s characters anticipate the New Woman...Although these characters succumb to the fate prescribed by mid-Victorian narrative—they die—they retain the sympathy of the reader and in so doing, sustain a critique of the conditions that necessitate their elimination” (“Ouida and the Other” 170-71). This commentary fittingly applies to *Cometh Up*, too, since Nell actually dies where Ouida’s Vere does not. I concur with Gilbert that Victorian authors often made use of a

heroine's death as a plot device to drive home a certain social commentary. Nell verbalizes her desire for a man who is not her husband. Moreover, Broughton does not necessarily allow Nell to die as a form of punishment for being sinful but, as Gilbert insinuates, her death carries with it a larger social implication. Ultimately, Nell must die because Victorian society in no way permits her to exercise control of this crucial part of her identity, much less acknowledge it. Vere, in turn, exists in a sort of death in life at the close of *Moths*. She and her new husband, Corrèze, live in exile in the Alps. While Vere has divorced her abusive first husband, I see her second marriage and removal from society as an imprisonment not unlike death. Throughout *Moths*, Ouida criticizes those who exploit and try to manage Vere's sexuality, and she ends the novel with Vere effectively handing control of this sexuality over to a man who has been trying to manipulate it from the start of the text. To me, this conclusion signals Ouida's overarching critique that it is nearly impossible for a woman to gain physical and sexual independence since Victorian society allows for the continual exploitation of the female body.

It is interesting to note that Ouida was often at odds in the public press with New Woman author Sarah Grand, yet Ouida's literature regularly aligns with the sort of reforms Grand advocated. Additionally, Grand and Ouida often voice the same harsh critiques of marriage laws and even female education; their differences, though, lie in the fact that Ouida frequently expressed her censure through her fiction, where Grand did so in numerous articles and editorials. One of Grand's articles, "Does Marriage Hinder a Woman's Self-Development?" (1898), lines up nicely with Ouida's discussion of marriage as a form of bondage in *Moths*. Like Ouida, Grand sees Victorian society as being complicit in the subjugation of women: "Tied to a man who, from obtuseness or selfishness or principle, not only does not assist her development, but refuses to recognise either the necessity or the possibility of further development, the married



woman finds her intellect shut in a dungeon from which there is no escape” (576). Although Grand’s references here are to female education, her points about women being stymied intellectually echo Ouida’s critiques of society allowing for the exploitation of the female body and female sexuality. On another note, even before Grand’s publication of this particular article, Ouida had written “The Woman Problem,” which is perhaps the most pro-feminist piece she ever wrote. She gave the article to *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* in the 1880s, with the stipulation that it be published only after Ouida’s death. The piece was ultimately published in 1909, a year after Ouida died. In it, Ouida recognizes the potential of women to exist as equals to men. Similar to New Women authors like Grand, Ouida suggests that bettering female education, as is their ability to be more independent: “It can scarcely be doubted that we earnestly desire to see women of more use and more capable of self-support than they are now...and we are perfectly convinced that the world will be infinitely benefited if other means of livelihood are opened to them” (592). The ending of *Moths* especially drives home Ouida’s point here that women need to be more self-sufficient, as Vere places herself under the control of a second husband at the novel’s close.

Since Ouida evidently shared many of the New Woman mindsets, it can be difficult to understand why she wrote against this figure so vehemently. While her reasons for doing so cannot be definitively pinned down, it is possible to see her denunciation of the New Woman as an attempt to secure her own good reputation. Talia Schaffer goes on to suggest, “The New Woman’s repulsiveness allows Ouida to construct herself decorously by contrast. Second, the New Woman, as the avatar of all extremism, leaves the field free for Ouida to propose her own political ideas without being branded a radical” (“‘Nothing but Foolscap’” 46). Schaffer’s proposition seems a reasonable one, particularly considering that Ouida did not want the most

pro-feminist and pro-New Woman article she wrote to be published in her lifetime. In turn, it must be remembered that Ouida's career as an author was her primary means of subsistence, supporting both herself and her mother. Pitting herself against the "radical" New Woman would have been a clever move for an already outspoken public figure to attempt to shape herself as respectable.

Unlike Ouida, Broughton did not extensively publish articles and editorials on social issues during her lifetime; as a consequence, understanding her opinions means making as much as possible of her fictional works. As with Ouida, Broughton's opinions on social concerns during her life cannot definitively be parsed out, but it is possible to pick out certain trends in her work. One popular reference to Broughton's fiction is that her novels were originally viewed as racy and progressive, but toward the end of her career her texts had become fairly tame (Benson 269). *Cometh Up* was one novel by Broughton that scandalized readers with its frank discussion of female sexuality, and for this reason I see the work, with its untraditional focus on female identity, as a forerunner to New Woman novels. Interestingly, Broughton's later novel *Dear Faustina* (1897) has been read as an *anti-New Woman* text.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, the span between the publication of *Cometh Up* and *Dear Faustina* is 30 years, and it is impossible to know how Broughton's opinions changed and evolved during that time. As Ouida had, Broughton may also have been positioning herself against the progressive New Woman in order to make her own work appear less radical.

In any case, it is most important to recognize that *Cometh Up* and *Moths* essentially bridge the gap from mid-century Victorian women's literature, making it possible for New Woman fiction to evolve. Broughton and Ouida's frank discussions of female identity and

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of this, see Lisa Hager's "Slumming With the New Woman" and Patricia Murphy's "Disdained and Disempowered."

female sexuality in many ways precede the work of authors like Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird. What is more, Broughton and Ouida may never be considered canonical English authors, but their legacies to developing feminist literature of the late-Victorian period cannot be denied.

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